Snake In The Grass

Children have an innate innocence that most adults find so appealing, so engaging, that it is like a commodity to be possessed. They go about their little lives with such passion and purpose, they are ignorant of sad things around them. Sad things take many forms, and once a child experiences such an event, it is hard for them to make sense of what has happened.

When a child first experiences the facts of death, trauma, cruelty, neglect or abuse, the child's basic personality of carefree trust is obliterated. It is called "growing up."

Over the course of several months' dad moved us into the 'new house,' where we lived in the upper level. The basement was being finished, and my menagerie had grown to become an obstacle course. Dad built a nice snake cage with a slanted glass front for easy viewing. The glass slid to either side for easy access and cleaning. Not far away were sawhorses that held a screened cage full of mice.

Every week or so a sacrificial mouse or two were offered to my serpentine charges. (*They had to eat; that's just how it was*.) Such gleeful ferocity during the strike and wrap up moment always fascinated me. Then a calm, slow resolve enveloped both predator and prey. Finally came the tedious manipulation of mandibles as they pulled the furry prize further into that endless throat. The mouse disappears and becomes an obvious bulge within the snake. The unhooked jaws are realigned, and the tongue makes a few swipes along its scaley lips, suggesting the tasty treat was well received. *I became numb to death – insensitive as my mother told me to be. I became the tribesman offering the spear to the zebra.* Or so I thought.

As with all things, what goes in must come out. Snake poop and mice droppings combined with a hot California summer make a very pungent mix. Mom insisted the time was "ripe" for a major cleaning of the basement and the cages.

I carried all the cages outdoors, went back to sweep out the basement and fling around a wet mop with Lysol. Next, I moved all the mice to a holding cage and removed all the used shavings and droppings. After a good scrubbing I replaced fresh litter and clean dishes for the mice.
With the biggest task done, I turned my attention to the snakes.

It is hard for anyone to realize they are responsible for the death of their pet. My initial confusion escalated to horror when both my snakes were found belly up in twisted contortions, mouths agape and flaccid tongues. I pulled aside the glass door and reached inside the extremely hot enclosure. I knew what I had done – I set them outside in the sun and in their silent panic, roasted alive. I lifted out their limp bodies and laid them in the grass. I ran cool water from the hose over them in hopes they would revive. They did not. So, I sat there and cried for what I had done – it haunts me still.

During these formative early years, I spent little time with friends from school. The kids on the street were primarily boys and gross ones at that. Mom never had any desire to learn to drive, therefore she and my pets entertained me day after day. I was understandably shy, yet still gregarious and fun loving.

As the house renovation continued, a large hole was cut into the floor of one room, for stairs to access the basement. My brother and I would have our own rooms and share a bath. The other half of the basement was a big family room, where the pool table resided. With all this extra room, my folks offered Bruce (dad's brother) a place to stay after he got out of the Air Force.

Wow! This was a real treat for my brother and me. Bruce became our favorite uncle, someone to talk to, tease and roughhouse with. Bruce enrolled in a local college and slept on the Danish modern fold out couch.

It was the mid 60's with Elvis and the Beatles fueling an exciting, upbeat lifestyle. Bruce had no desire to live back on the farm in Ohio, and he envied his older brothers' obvious success.
So, Bruce became part of our family. He attended classes during the week and tried to study with a noisy niece and nephew. Bruce would join us on family trips on weekends, such as Palm Springs Tram and camping trips up to Mt. Baldy. I was becoming more outgoing and happier; we even had visits by all the grandparents from Ohio.

The carefree eleven-year-old pixie I had become was suddenly extinguished, as thoughtlessly and effortlessly as pinching life out of a candle flame.

I was almost asleep when I heard a soft tapping at my bedroom door. Uncle Bruce pushed open the door and whispered a greeting. He wanted to talk to me. In the dark I could not see that he was butt naked. He stretched out next to me on my bed, rambling about how grown up, smart and pretty I was. He had something special for me and was going to put it in my hand. My eyes became adjusted enough in the dark to see him place his pale, rigid penis into my open hand. I froze in shock as Uncle Bruce continued with whispered demands for secrecy. His slimy wet tongue flicked into my ear and his groping hand searched for my non-existent breasts. Encouraged by my muteness, his hand diverted down my stomach, heading between my legs. I tensed even further and found my voice. "***Get out! Get out, or I'll tell mom***!" Uncle Bruce withered in retreat, and the sleeping household remained unaware of the transgression that had just transpired.

The next morning, I asked mom to make Uncle Bruce stay out of my room. She was stunned.

No parent is prepared to deal with such horrible betrayal. It is one thing to deal with a shy, sensitive child and dead pets, but to realize a family member could degrade a child's innocence was evil. I remember police officers trying to coax me to tell them what happened. If my folks had assured me, I was not at fault – I do not remember it. My brother, however, could only conclude I was to blame for Uncle Bruce suddenly moving out of our house.

This event tainted my impression of men, especially white ones. My father was more inclined to believe his brother over his 'sensitive' eleven-year-old daughter. Mom, however, was adamant Uncle Bruce moved out of our house. Over the years my father was critical and condescending of my choices of boyfriends. I became the 'black sheep' in our family.

Decades later, after my brother Brian died, his widow told me of the grudge he had against me! That was quite a surprise. I have not interacted with my brother much since leaving home after high school. Yet I could surmise my father's negative attitude rubbed off onto his son. Brian's wife Lisa was dumb founded to hear I had been molested at age eleven. I guess it wasn't that important.